



News Release

WISCONSIN ARMY AND AIR NATIONAL GUARD

Public Affairs Office
2400 Wright Street
Madison, WI 53704

Contact: Lt. Col. Tim Donovan
608-242-3050
Cell: 608-516-1777

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NEWS FEATURE

Homeland defense is “Job One” for Wisconsin’s National Guard

*By Lt. Col. Tim Donovan
Wisconsin National Guard*

Three years have now passed since the September morning in 2001 when terrorists attacked America and changed the world. That attack brought renewed focus on the National Guard and the Guard’s first and most important mission.

Beginning more than 100 years before America was a nation, colonial militias — forerunners of the modern National Guard — were always about protecting their communities. This mission has never been more important than it is today.

The Wisconsin Guard’s soldiers and airmen have been serving on the front lines of a new, 21st Century war since the very morning of September 11. Their important role continues — and grows.

Where are the front lines in this new war?

Today’s “battlefield” includes the mountains and caves of Afghanistan as well as the streets of Baghdad and Mosul. But it also includes the skies over America and every acre of a land once protected by vast oceans but now unsettlingly exposed to threats from fanatics armed with boxcutters, homemade bombs or worse.

The terrorists who created this frightening new world also re-emphasized the Guard’s important role as America’s homeland defense experts.

As the homeland security threat condition was raised for several U.S. locations this summer, National Guard bureau chief, Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, directed the National Guards of the 54 states and territories to step up their homeland defense capabilities. In August, each state stood up a new Rapid Reaction Force — a force specifically designed, trained and equipped for homeland defense in the post-9/11 world. Each state’s RRF can muster a company-sized element of about 125 troops within four hours, with a battalion-sized force available within 24 hours, if required, to sustain operations beyond an initial response.

The reaction forces aren’t new units, though, because they are leveraged from existing force structure — built entirely from units and troops we already have. Nor is this a new mission for Guard. As the Guard Bureau chief reminded state public affairs officers meeting in Colorado Springs in July: “We’re the National Guard — we guard the nation.”

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Wisconsin's Rapid Reaction Force was formed in August, made up mostly from soldiers of the 32nd Brigade's 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry. Drawing troops from this Appleton-based infantry battalion made sense, according to the Wisconsin Army Guard's commander, Brig. Gen. Kerry Denson.

"These are mostly light infantry soldiers," Denson said as he observed the RRF's first exercise in September. "They're out there doing pretty much the same things infantry soldiers have been doing forever, like establishing security, patrolling, running checkpoints. What's different is where they're doing it and why, because the potential enemy the country faced during the Cold War is far different from the real enemy — terrorists — that we might face today right here at home."

The exercise, held Sept. 12 on the campus of Northeastern Wisconsin Technical College in Green Bay, tested the Guard's ability to place an effective initial response package of 125 Soldiers on the ground in a hurry at an incident site or as a deterrent force.

With TV news crews and curious neighbors watching carefully, camouflaged soldiers swarmed over the sprawling campus. Razor wire barriers were quickly stretched across key entry points. Armed Humvees from the battalion's Delta Company prowled the grounds, occasionally racing to sectors requiring a little more firepower than the foot soldiers had on hand. From his hidden perch on a campus rooftop, a sniper stood silent watch — waiting, ready.

"Here at the squad level, this exercise was all unscripted," according to Staff Sgt. Joe Streeter, a squad leader with Charlie Company in Fond du Lac. "The soldiers adapted very quickly to all the issues that came up, they did very well."

Streeter said his soldiers were happy to be part of something that's real-world and relevant. "It was a chance for us to see how all the tasks we trained on fit into the big picture in a realistic situation," Streeter said.

Vehicles entering the area were carefully searched for weapons, bombs or other suspicious contents. Even TV news cars were searched, while the reporters videotaped the action for their nightly newscasts.

"Because these are light infantry soldiers, they came into this additional assignment with almost all the training and equipment they needed to be an effective force from day one," Denson said. "But the special training they did receive was really focused on the terrorist threat, either what capabilities they would need as a deterrent force or in the event they were responding to an actual terrorist incident."

In addition to the infantry battalion, other reaction force troops would come from the 32nd Brigade's cavalry troop in Merrill and Antigo, and from the brigade's military police platoon in Wausau. Transportation and other support for the reaction force, if needed, can be drawn from still other Wisconsin Guard units — either Army or Air.

"There's no more important mission for the Guard right now than homeland defense," said Maj. Gen. Al Wilkening, the adjutant general of Wisconsin.

"Wisconsin's citizens deserve nothing less than their National Guard's continued focus on the vital homeland defense business," Wilkening said. "The Guard is prepared to deploy anywhere in the world — and certainly anywhere in Wisconsin — where Wisconsin National Guard soldiers and airmen can help keep Wisconsin and America safe from anyone who would cause us harm."

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